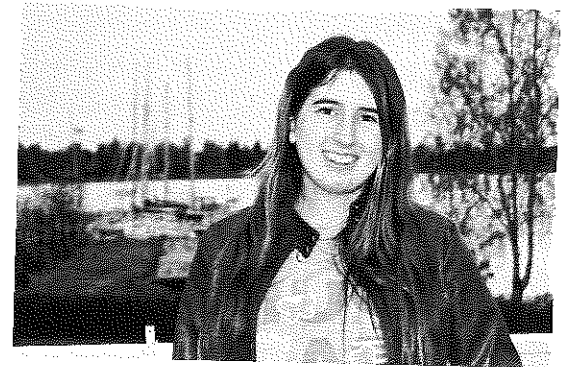


chapter 5



From Oklahoma to Finland: Kim in Pietarsaari.

an american in utopia

By late November, Kim's commute to school had become a dark and frigid odyssey. On this particular morning, it was five degrees and windy. The sun would not rise until nine, well into Kim's first class. As she walked, her footsteps crackling in the icy silence, she wondered how Pietarsaari had ever become inhabited. Perched on the west coast of Finland, the town was three hundred miles from Helsinki. How could anyone have endured this winter and thought it was a good idea to stay for another? Pietarsaari had around twenty thousand residents by then, but aside from the occasional car, she saw no other humans for most of her journey.

Up ahead, she could make out the lights of the Pietarsaari *Lukio*, her high school. From the outside, it looked even more depressing than her school back home, a fact that still surprised her three months into her stay. Both schools were low-slung, brick structures, but this one was built out of off-white bricks that had turned gray and dreary with age. A large clock outside the school had stopped working some

time ago. This was not the way Finnish schools had looked in her imagination.

She walked inside as groups of laughing boys and pretty girls passed by, ignoring her. The entryway of the school was small and institutional. There were trophies on display, like at Sallisaw High School, but they seemed like an afterthought, dusty and dull. The newest one was ten years old. Had no teams won a single trophy in a decade? She walked on, trying not to bump into anyone.

She sat down in her Finnish class, smiling shyly at the girls next to her. Kim's Finnish teacher seemed even more animated than usual, saying something in Finnish that Kim did not understand. Then the teacher began passing out copies of a heavy book to all the students. Kim recognized the cover. It was *Seven Brothers*, a Finnish classic published in 1870.

Even Kim knew about *Seven Brothers*. When it was written, the Finns were the underclass in their own country. They'd endured five centuries of Swedish, then Russian, domination. Then came *Seven Brothers*, the first major book written in Finnish. The tale of seven rowdy, uncouth, and often delinquent young men who eventually taught themselves to read became a metaphor for Finland, a country that did not even declare its independence until 1917.

Kim felt a knot in her stomach. She knew she could not read *Seven Brothers*. It was written in old Finnish, and she still couldn't understand new Finnish. What would she do? She inhaled and tried to rearrange her face to look mildly curious, like she'd been expecting this all along.

Then the teacher appeared at her side. Kim's teacher, Tiina Stara, was slim and attractive with layered brown hair and a quick smile. She leaned down toward Kim. In her hands, she had a different book. This book was much wider and thinner, with a glossy, shiny cover.

"This is for you," she said quietly in English.

Kim looked at the cover. Instead of seven brothers, it had a cartoon image of seven dogs, all dressed in old-fashioned costume, howl-

ing in unison. She translated the title in her head: *Seven Dog Brothers*. Kim laughed. It was a children's book.

"It's in Finnish, but simple Finnish," Stara explained. She looked nervous, as if afraid she might hurt Kim's feelings. "I hope you don't think this is childish. It's just that I would love for you to be able to experience this story, because it is very important for us in Finland. And the plot is the same, so you can follow along with our conversation."

Kim took the book, her eyes full of gratitude. "*Kiitos*," she said. Thank you.

During her three months in Finland, Kim had collected a small catalogue of differences between school here and in Oklahoma. The most obvious were the things that were missing. There were no high-tech, interactive white boards in her classroom. There was no police officer in the hallway. Over time, though, she had begun to notice more important distinctions—the kind that a visiting adult would not see.

Take the stoner kid, as Kim had nicknamed him in her head. He'd walked into class that day looking hung over, with glassy eyes, as usual. He had short blonde hair, icy blue eyes, and a nose that was always a shade redder than the rest of his skin. He didn't talk much in class, but when he was with his friends, smoking cigarettes outside, he was louder.

Kim had seen plenty of kids like him in Sallisaw. Somehow, she hadn't expected to see stoner kids in Finland. But there he was. Every country had its stoner kids, as it turned out. That was lesson one. There was only one major difference, as far as she could tell, and this was lesson two. The Finnish stoner kid was a model student. He showed up to class, and he was attentive. He took notes. When Stara assigned essays, which was often, he wrote them, just like everybody else.

In Oklahoma, the stoner kids didn't do much schoolwork, in Kim's experience. They didn't care. Here, all kids complained about school, too, and they had teachers they liked and disliked. Yet most of

them seemed to have bought into the idea of education on some level.

Sometimes Kim found herself staring at this kid and his friends. They didn't fit into any of the boxes she had used to organize the world. It was hard to explain, but there just seemed to be something in the air here. Whatever it was, it made everyone more serious about learning, even the kids who had not bought into other adult dictates.

Kim noticed that some of the teachers seemed more bought-in to school, too. Stara, the Finnish teacher, realized it was probably ridiculous for Kim to even be in a Finnish class for Finnish high-school students, given Kim's primitive grasp of the language. And she had plenty of other students to worry about, students at a range of skill levels themselves. Still, she'd taken the time to come up with an alternative for Kim—a way to include her, despite everything. The children's book was a creative solution. Kim opened it up and began to read about the seven dog brothers.

a tale of two teachers

Like Kim's math teacher back in Oklahoma, Stara was a veteran teacher, approaching two decades in the profession. Both teachers had jobs that were protected by powerful unions, and neither could easily be dismissed. This pattern held true in most developed countries around the world: Teachers' unions held a lot of power, and teachers rarely got fired anywhere.

The similarities ended there. From the moment she had decided to study education in college, Stara had entered a profession completely different from that of Kim's Oklahoma teacher. To become a teacher in Finland, Stara had had to first get accepted into one of only eight prestigious teacher-training universities. She had high test scores and good grades, but she knew the odds were still against her.

She'd wanted to teach Finnish, so she'd applied to the Finnish department at the University of Jyväskylä. In addition to sending them her graduation-exam scores, she'd had to read four books selected

by the university, then sit for a special Finnish literature exam. Then she'd waited: Only 20 percent of applicants were accepted.

At that time, all of Finland's teacher-training colleges had similarly high standards, making them about as selective as Georgetown or the University of California, Berkeley in the United States. Today, Finland's education programs are even more selective, on the order of MIT. It was hard to overstate the implications that cascaded from this one fact. Just one out of every twenty education schools was located at a highly selective institution in the United States. Far more than that had no admission standards at all. In other words, to educate our children, we invited anyone—no matter how poorly educated they were—to give it a try. The irony was revealing, a bit like recruiting flight instructors who had never successfully landed a plane, then wondering why so many planes were crashing.

After spending years racking up college loans, teachers-to-be in the United States generally had to pass standardized tests in order to get a teaching position. But the tests were not challenging or particularly relevant to effective teaching. By then, the damage was done: Everyone assumed that the education majors were not the smartest kids in college, generally speaking, and their profession got little respect as a result.

In Finland, *all* education schools were selective. Getting into a teacher-training program there was as prestigious as getting into medical school in the United States. The rigor started in the beginning, where it belonged, not years into a teacher's career with complex evaluation schemes designed to weed out the worst performers, and destined to demoralize everyone else.

A teacher union advertisement from the late 1980s began with this breathtaking boast: "A Finnish teacher has received the highest level of education in the world." Such a claim could never have been made in the United States, or in most countries in the world.

Norway, for example, shares a border with Finland and spends more on education. But Norway is not choosy about who gets to

become a teacher, and the quality of preparation varies wildly, just as it does in the United States. Norwegians have fretted about the quality of their teacher-training colleges for decades, and the government routinely interferes in the training to try to make it better. As in many countries, teachers are made to attain ever more amounts of training and education, without much regard for quality. Partly as a result, Norwegian fifteen-year-olds perform at about the same middling levels as teenagers in the United States on PISA, and even the most privileged among them perform poorly in math, compared to advantaged teenagers worldwide.

Back in Finland, Stara still remembers the day she got the letter of acceptance—her mother's excitement, the rush of relief. She didn't celebrate; Finns were much too modest to brag about such things in those days. But she felt very, very lucky.

When she arrived at the University of Jyväskylä, Stara spent the first three years studying Finnish literature. She read intensely and wrote multiple twenty-page papers. She analyzed novels, poems, and short stories—something English trainee teachers do not generally do in the United States. At the same time, she took other required courses, including statistics. In her fourth year (out of six years of study), she began the teacher-training program. All Finnish teachers were required to get a master's degree, which meant something very different than it did in the United States.

For one full year of her master's program, Stara got to train in one of the best public schools in the country. She had three teacher mentors there, and she watched their classes closely. When she taught her own classes, her mentors and fellow student teachers took notes. Afterward, she got feedback, some of it harsh, in much the way medical residents are critiqued in teaching hospitals.

It was hard but exhilarating. She learned she needed to get better at motivating her students at the start of each lesson, before she did anything else. In time, she improved. When Stara wasn't teaching or observing other teachers, she collaborated with her fellow student

teachers to design lessons that integrated material from all their subjects, including history and art. Then they practiced teaching those lessons, pretending they were students. Like all Finnish teachers, Stara also had to do original research to get her degree, so she wrote a two-hundred-page thesis on the ways that teenagers' spoken Finnish shaped their written Finnish.

Now, consider Kim's math teacher back home, Scott Bethel. He'd decided to become a teacher mostly so that he could become a football coach. In America, this made sense. As a student at Sallisaw High School, he was an all-state quarterback in 1989. "My dad taught at a school about ten miles from here," Bethel told me. "He was also a football coach, and I was always good at sports, and I thought, 'You know what, I'd like to become a coach.'"

Although Bethel hadn't taken calculus in high school, he'd always been pretty good at math. So, he figured the best way to become a coach was to become a math teacher. Bethel was one of several coaches that Kim had as teachers over the years, a hybrid job that would be considered bizarre in Finland and many countries, where sports lay beyond the central mission of schools.

In Oklahoma alone, Bethel could choose from nearly two dozen teacher-training programs—almost three times as many as in all of Finland, a much bigger place. Oklahoma, like most states, educated far more teachers than it needed. At most U.S. colleges, education was known as one of the easiest majors. Education departments usually welcomed almost anyone who claimed to like children. Once students got there, they were rewarded with high grades and relatively easy work. Instead of taking the more rigorous mathematics classes offered to other students, for example, education majors tended to take special math classes designed for students who did not like math.

Bethel did his training at Northeastern State University, like the Sallisaw superintendent and many Oklahoma teachers, including Kim's mom. The university prepares more teachers than any other institution in the state and has a good reputation. However, it also

has a 75 percent acceptance rate, which means that it admits, on average, students with much weaker math, reading, and science skills than Finnish education schools. The university's typical ACT score is lower than the national average for ACT-takers—a pattern that holds true for many teacher-training programs all over America.

To teach in Oklahoma, Bethel did not need a master's degree. He could receive a raise if he got one, and many U.S. teachers did. But, since the typical education college had low standards and little rigor, an advanced degree did not mean much. In many states, teachers were not required to get degrees in their subject area, so they got a master's in teaching instead. A master's degree did not make American teachers better at their jobs, generally speaking, and some research suggested it made them worse.

Nationwide, the United States produced nearly two and a half times the numbers of teachers it needed each year. The surplus was particularly extreme for elementary school teachers. The United States was not exceptional in this regard. The combination of low standards and high supply plagued education systems around the world, dumbing down the entire teaching profession. Oklahomans praised their teachers for doing a hard job, and rightfully so, but they didn't brag about how well educated they were.

Interestingly, Finland's landscape used to be littered with small teaching colleges of varying quality, just like in the United States. That helped explain why the first phase of reforms in Finland were painful, top-down, accountability-based measures. Finland, it turns out, had its own No Child Left Behind moment, one that today will sound familiar to teachers in the United States and many other countries. In the 1970s, Finnish teachers had to keep diaries recording what they taught each hour. National school inspectors made regular visits to make sure teachers were following an exhaustive, seven-hundred-page centralized curriculum. Central authorities approved textbooks. Teachers could not be trusted to make their own decisions.

During the same time period, the Finnish government did some-

thing else, too—something that has never happened in the United States or most other countries. The Finns rebooted their teacher-training colleges, forcing them to become much more selective and rigorous. As part of a broader reform of higher education, the government shuttered the smaller schools and moved teacher preparation into the more respected universities. It was a bold reform, and not without controversy. Opponents argued that the new system was elitist and would, as one editorial warned, “block the road to our rural youth when their inner calling beckons them to a [teaching] career.” Some university leaders objected, too, fearing that the inclusion of such preprofessional, practical training might dilute academic standards for the rest of the departments and lower their institutions' prestige. Interestingly, these same arguments were also made in the United States whenever anyone tried to make teacher training more selective.

Still, Finland was desperate to modernize, and the country's leaders agreed that education was the only thing that could save their country from being left behind. The more I read the history and talked to Finns who understood it, the more I admired the common sense running through the story. The Finns decided that the only way to get serious about education was to select highly educated teachers, the best and brightest of each generation, and train them rigorously. So, that's what they did. It was a radically obvious strategy that few countries have attempted.

Then, in the 1980s and 1990s, something magnificent happened. Finland evolved to an entirely new state, unrealized in almost any country in the world. It happened slowly, and partly by accident, but it explained more about Finland's success than almost anything else.

With the new, higher standards and more rigorous teacher training in place, Finland's top-down, No-Child-Left-Behind-style mandates became unnecessary. More than that, they were a burden, preventing teachers and schools from reaching a higher level of excellence. So Finland began dismantling its most oppressive regulations, piece by piece, as if removing the scaffolding from a fine sculpture.

The government abolished school inspections. It didn't need them anymore. Now that teachers had been carefully chosen and trained, they were trusted to help develop a national core curriculum, to run their own classrooms, and to choose their own textbooks. They were trained the way teachers should be trained and treated the way teachers should be treated.

In the early 1990s, an economic crisis accelerated this evolution, ironically enough. Because of a deep recession, Finland's local authorities needed to slash spending. Education budgets had to be cut 15 to 20 percent. The only way local officials would agree to deep cuts was if they got something in return. So, national leaders agreed to grant even more autonomy to the locals, more than most other countries had ever dared to do. This liberation worked only because of all the changes that had come before. By then, the Finns had engineered a robust system with highly educated, well-trained teachers and relatively coherent (and high) standards. Once that system was in place, the accountability checks and balances were superfluous. School leaders and teachers were free to write their own lesson plans, engineer experiments within their schools to find out what worked, and generally design a more creative system than any centralized authority ever could.

By the time Kim got to Finland, teachers, principals, union leaders, and politicians routinely worked together to continually improve the education system. They sometimes disagreed, but collaboration was normal, and trust was high. The government conducted standardized testing of targeted samples of students—to make sure schools were performing. But there was no need to test all students, year after year.

Why hadn't that evolution ever happened in the United States—or in most other countries? Had anyone even tried?

The examples were few but revealing. As the new education commissioner in Rhode Island, one of Deborah Gist's first acts was to raise the minimum test scores for teachers-to-be in 2009. At the time, Rhode Island allowed lower scores than almost any state in the nation. She had the power to change this unilaterally, and she did, taking one

small step in the direction of Finland by requiring new teachers to score significantly higher on the SAT, ACT, and the Praxis, a teacher certification test.

Immediately, critics called her elitist, lobbing the same accusations critics had used against reformers in Finland in the 1970s. Some argued that a teacher who struggled in school was actually a better teacher, because that teacher could relate to students who were failing. It was a perverse logic. Would a doctor who had botched several surgeries be an ideal medical-school professor?

Others worried that higher standards would lead to a teacher shortage. Yet Rhode Island's teacher colleges already churned out 1,000 teachers a year, about 800 more than the school system needed to hire. Supply, particularly of elementary school teachers, was not a problem. Moreover, the laws of human nature applied: Once it became harder to be a teacher, it could also become more attractive. More people might want to do it, and fewer established teachers might leave the profession.

Because this was America, a diverse country with a long history of racism in colleges, public schools, and every other institution, Gist's efforts were also attacked as discriminatory. Higher education leaders warned that the new standards would prevent minority students, who tended to score lower on tests, from becoming teachers.

In reality, the Rhode Island teaching force was already far too white and far too female; to become more diverse and attract more men, in particular, it could be argued, the profession needed to be more prestigious, not less. More to the point, minority students needed highly educated *and* diverse teachers. It was interesting to note that higher standards were seen not as an investment in students; they were seen, first and foremost, as a threat to teachers.

Rhode Island's teacher-preparation programs produced *five times* more teachers than Rhode Island's public schools actually hired each year. The only institution benefiting from this system seemed to be the colleges themselves, but college leaders still complained that they

would lose too many students if the standards were higher. They voiced this concern to newspaper reporters, and reporters quoted them without irony.

"It will disenfranchise too many students," Roger G. Eldridge Jr., interim dean of the School of Education at Rhode Island College told the *Providence Journal*. It was a revealing word choice: Disenfranchise usually means to deprive someone of a sacred legal right, such as the right to vote. And that is in fact how many people viewed the job; most Americans said teaching was a hard and important job, but many of them, including teachers and teaching professors, didn't seem to believe it required serious intellectual heft.

Under the new, higher standards, about 85 percent of Rhode Island College's education students would not make the cut, the dean threatened. Coming from the college that produced more Rhode Island teachers than any other, this was an astounding statistic, one that should have been a source of deep shame, but was not.

Gist did not back down, however. "I have the utmost confidence that Rhode Island's future teachers are capable of this kind of performance," she said. She did agree to phase in the higher cut score gradually over two years and to allow colleges to ask for waivers for highly promising candidates who did not make the cut score. Three years later, she had not received any waiver requests. At Rhode Island College, the percentage of minority students studying to be teachers went from 8.8 percent to 9.24 percent, remaining essentially unchanged despite all predictions to the contrary.

For some American teachers, the lack of serious training didn't matter; they made up for what they didn't know by learning on the job. Some got lucky and had a strong principal or mentor. For other teachers, though, this education gap did matter. As more of their students aspired to attend college, and the economy increasingly rewarded higher-level thinking, more teachers were being asked to teach material they'd never really learned themselves.

Beyond the practical effects, the lower standards sent a demor-

alizing message: In America and Norway and many other countries, we did not expect our teachers to be the best and brightest of their generation. We told them so in a thousand different ways, and the messaging started the day they went to college.

When Kim was starting kindergarten in 2000, ten out of ten new Finnish teachers had graduated in the top third of their high school classes; only two out of ten American teachers had done so. Incredibly, at some U.S. colleges, students had to meet higher academic standards to play football than to become teachers.

In Finland, the government paid tuition for Stara and all university students. In Oklahoma, Bethel's tuition was paid, too, but his free ride came from a carefully cobbled together safety net of Pell grants, a partial athletic scholarship, and Indian grants. Most students could not manage this feat.

During his sophomore year at Northeastern State University, Bethel had applied to the university's education college. Here was another chance for the university to select its best and brightest to become teachers. But to be admitted, Bethel had to have a grade-point average of just 2.5 or higher (out of 4). He would have needed a higher GPA to become an optometrist at the same university today. To be a teacher, he also had to have at least a C grade in freshman English and a C in speech or a class called the fundamentals of oral communication.

He also needed a score of 19 or higher on the ACT, a standardized test like the SAT. The national average for the ACT back then was 20.6. Let's consider what this meant: It was acceptable to perform *below average* for the country on a test of what you had learned throughout your educational career if you aspired to dedicate your career to education.

At the education college, Bethel discovered that he didn't have to major in math to become a high-school math teacher. So he didn't. Nationwide, less than half of American high-school math teachers majored in math. Almost a third did not even minor in math.

The problem was even worse among students training to teach younger children. "A large majority of elementary education majors are afraid of math," one Oklahoma math department chair said in response to a 2005 survey. "This fear will be passed on to their students." Another estimated that about a quarter of teachers graduating from his or her college actively hated math and showed no interest in improving.

Bethel liked math, but his primary goal was to become a coach, so he majored in physical education and minored in math. When he took the required test for high school math teachers in Oklahoma, he passed easily. Most of the material was at a tenth or eleventh grade level, and he didn't find it difficult. However, if he had, he would have been allowed to retake the test until he passed.

Nationwide, people studying to become math teachers in the United States did not have to actually know that much math compared to teachers in the education superpowers. The deficit was particularly alarming among middle-school math teachers. When researchers tested thousands of aspiring teachers in sixteen countries, they found that future middle-school math teachers in the United States knew about as much math as their peers in Thailand and Oman. They had nowhere near the math competence of teachers-in-training in Taiwan, Singapore, or Poland. So it was not surprising that those same teachers' students would perform just as unimpressively later on. You could not teach what you didn't know.

Still, the most valuable part of any teacher preparation program may be the hands-on practice that student teachers get in a real-life classroom. There is no better way to prepare for teaching than to actually teach—and get meaningful feedback on how to improve.

In Oklahoma, Bethel's student teaching experience helped him learn to plan lessons and manage a classroom. But it lasted just twelve weeks, compared to the year-long residency typical in Finland. Nationwide, U.S. teacher-training colleges only require an average of twelve to fifteen weeks of student teaching, and the quality varies wildly depending on the place.

When Bethel got his first teaching job, he quickly realized that it would have been helpful to major in math. But what was done was done. By the time he taught Kim, he was earning about \$49,000 per year, which was more than the typical salary in Sallisaw but still not a lot. Across the Atlantic Ocean, Stara was earning about \$67,000. The cost of living was higher in Finland, but Stara's salary was still higher. And her salary was closer to what other college graduates earned in Finland than Bethel's salary was in the United States.

Interestingly, large salaries did not necessarily coincide with greatness worldwide. The world's highest paid teachers lived in Spain, where teenagers performed worse in math, reading, and science than students in the United States. But in higher-functioning education systems, larger salaries could help schools attract better-educated teachers and retain them over time, establishing a baseline of professionalism and prestige. In all the education superpowers, teachers' incomes were closer to the salaries of other college-educated professionals than they were in the United States. In most cases, classes were also larger than they were in the United States, making the cost of the salaries more manageable.

As I listened to teachers like Stara and Bethel, I started to suspect that all these differences interacted, in chronological order. Because teacher colleges selected only the top applicants in Finland and other education superpowers, those schools could spend less time doing catch-up instruction and more time on rigorous, hands-on training; because teachers entered the classroom with rigorous training and a solid education, they were less likely than American teachers to quit in frustration. This model of preparation and stability made it possible to give teachers larger class sizes and pay them decently, since the turnover costs were much lower than in other countries. And, since they had all this training and support, they had the tools to help kids learn, year after year, and to finally pass a truly demanding graduation test at the end of high school.

The subconscious effects were just as powerful. As one U.S. ex-

change student to Finland explained in the survey conducted for this book:

"My Finnish school fostered a great deal of respect for the institution and faculty in the students. This can be partly explained by the academic rigors that teachers had to endure in their journeys to becoming educators. The students were well aware of how accomplished their teachers were."

One thing led to another. Otherwise, one thing led to much less. If the rigor didn't start at the beginning, then the most challenging high-school graduation test in the world would not succeed. Federal mandates could only go so far. Without highly educated and well-trained teachers and principals, kids could make only limited progress each year. Realizing that they could never pass the graduation test, many would tune out and give up.

The more time I spent in Finland, the more I started to worry that the reforms sweeping across the United States had the equation backwards. We were trying to reverse engineer a high-performance teaching culture through dazzlingly complex performance evaluations and value-added data analysis. It made sense to reward, train, and dismiss more teachers based on their performance, but that approach assumed that the worst teachers would be replaced with much better ones, and that the mediocre teachers would improve enough to give students the kind of education they deserved. However, there was not much evidence that either scenario was happening in reality.

What if the main problem was not motivation? Was it possible to hammer 3.6 million American teachers into becoming master educators if their SAT scores were below average?

The lesson from Finland had a linear elegance: If we wanted to get serious about education, at long last, we needed to start at the beginning. Following Finland's example, education colleges should only be allowed to admit students with SAT scores in the top third of the

national distribution or lose government funding and accreditation. Since 1.6 million U.S. teachers were due to retire between 2011 and 2021, a revolution in recruitment and training could change the entire profession in a short period of time.

Why hadn't this been done in any state in America? Given that colleges already prepared far more teachers than schools needed, this change would not necessarily have led to a teacher shortage. Over time, it might have actually increased the popularity of the profession by making it more prestigious.

It was a bizarre oversight. For all the time and energy that American educators had spent praising Finland, it was remarkable that they did not insist upon this most obvious first step. It was almost as if we wanted the prestige of Finland's teachers—but didn't really believe that our teachers needed to be highly educated and unusually accomplished in order to merit that prestige. But why, then, did Finland?

"why do you guys care so much?"

After class, Kim had a free period—a full seventy minutes with nothing scheduled. This was the other big difference she'd noticed about Finland: the inexplicable stretches of luxurious freedom. She kept finding herself released into the ether, trusted to find her way through long stretches of time. She could even walk out of the school in the middle of the day and go to a coffee shop in the village until her next class began. It was hard to get used to.

Even outside school she felt this freedom. She had learned her way to the Halpa-Halli supermarket by bike and, although it took her an embarrassingly long time to find the simplest ingredients, her host mother didn't seem to worry if she wasn't home on time.

Parents in general seemed to trust their kids more. Kim routinely saw eight-year-olds walking to school alone, wearing reflective vests to keep them visible in the dark. At the high school, she rarely saw parents for any reason. Teenagers were treated more like adults. There

were no regularly scheduled parent-teacher conferences. None. If teachers had a problem with the student, they usually just met with the student.

Kim wandered into the central lobby of the school and sat on one of the gray couches. Back home, she'd had five minutes free between classes, and anyone caught hanging out was in trouble. Part of her was still in Oklahoma, waiting for someone to come bust her.

Two girls from her class sat down next to her. They said hello to Kim and started talking about how hard they'd studied for midterm exams last year, lamenting all the work they had ahead of them.

Most of the time, the Finnish students were just as aloof as her guide books had told her they would be. But Kim was still new enough that she could ask them about Finland to make conversation. So, she collected her courage and blurted out the question that had been on her mind.

"Why do you guys care so much?"

The girls looked at her, confused. Kim felt her cheeks flush, but she barreled ahead.

"I mean, what makes you work hard in school?"

It was a hard question to answer, she realized, but she had to ask. These girls went to parties; they texted in class and doodled in their notebooks. They were normal, in other words. Yet they seemed to respect the basic premise of school, and Kim wanted to know why.

Now, both girls looked baffled, as if Kim had just asked them why they insisted on breathing so much.

"It's school," one of them said finally. "How else will I graduate and go to university and get a good job?"

Kim nodded. It was a fair question. Maybe the real mystery was not why Finnish kids cared so much, but why so many of her Oklahoma classmates did not. After all, for them, too, getting a good education was the only way to go to college and get a good job. Somewhere along the way, however, many of them had stopped believing in this equation. They didn't take education very seriously. Maybe be-

cause they were lazy, spoiled, or dysfunctional in some other way, or maybe because, in their experience, education wasn't all that serious.

"how is it possible you don't know this?"

Listening to Kim's impressions of Finland, I wondered if she were unique. Kim came from a relatively low-performing state, and no one would say she had an overly generous attitude toward her hometown. Would other exchange students notice the same differences? What about a teenager traveling in the opposite direction? Would a Finnish girl who'd chosen to come to the United States see a mirror image of what Kim had noticed in Finland?

Every year, about four hundred Finnish kids travel to the United States to live and study. Most of them ended up in the Midwest in public high schools. To find out what they thought of their borrowed land, I started tracking them down. It didn't take long to notice a pattern.

Elina came to America from Helsinki when she was sixteen, the same age as Kim. She came because she'd spent much of her life dreaming about the American high schools she saw on television and in movies: the prom, the pep rallies, and all the twinkling rituals of the American teenager.

In America, Elina lived with a host family in Colon, Michigan, a small town named after the punctuation mark, just outside Kalamazoo. At first, Elina's new world looked a lot like home. Colon was surrounded by lakes and trees. The population was 95 percent white and native born. On weekends, men zipped themselves into down jackets and played ice hockey on frozen lakes. The winter lasted most of the year, just like back home.

Early on, however, Elina discovered one important difference about America. Back home, she'd been a good student. In Colon, she was exceptional. She took Algebra II, the most advanced math class offered at Colon High. On her first test, she got 105 percent. Until

then, Elina had thought it was mathematically impossible to get 105 percent on anything.

She thought she might have more trouble in U.S. history class, since she was not, after all, American. Luckily, her teacher gave the class a study guide that contained all the questions—and answers—to the exam. On test day, Elina coasted through the questions because, well, she'd seen them in advance.

When the teacher handed the tests back, Elina was unsurprised to see she'd gotten an A. She was amazed, however, to see that some of the other students had gotten Cs. One of them looked at her and laughed at the absurdity.

"How is it possible you know this stuff?"

"How is it possible you *don't* know this stuff?" Elina answered.

I talked to Elina after she had left the United States and gone to college in Finland. She was planning to work in foreign affairs one day. Now that some time had gone by, I wondered if she had a theory about what she'd seen in her American school. Were the students too coddled? Or the opposite—too troubled? Too diverse? Maybe they were demoralized by all the standardized testing?

Elina didn't think so. In her experience, American kids didn't study much because, well, they didn't have to. "Not much is demanded of U.S. students," she said. In Finland, her exams were usually essay tests, requiring her to write three or four pages in response. "You really have to study. You have to prove that you know it," Elina told me about Finnish high school. In the United States, her tests were typically multiple choice.

"It was like elementary school in Finland," she said. In that history class, she remembers, the class spent an inordinate amount of time making posters. "We did so many posters. I remember telling my friends, 'Are you kidding me? Another poster?'" It was like arts and crafts, only more boring. The teacher gave all the students the information for the poster, and the kids just had to cut and glue their way to a finished product. Everybody's poster featured the same subject.

The expectations were lower in America, Elina concluded, and the consequences were, too. She took a journalism class in Colon that was taught by an outstanding teacher. Everyone loved this teacher, including Elina. More important, perhaps, they respected her, and knew they were learning in her class. However, when the teacher told everyone they had to write ten articles by the end of the semester, only Elina actually did all ten stories. The teacher was irritated, but the other students still passed the class.

Elina and Kim's observations were anecdotal to the extreme. How much could we make of a few kids' memories? But it was remarkable how many kids from all different lands agreed on this point. In a large, national survey, over half of American high schoolers echoed Elina's impression, reporting that their history work was often or always too easy. Less than half said they felt like they were always or almost always learning in math class.

In my own survey of 202 foreign-exchange students, an overwhelming majority said their U.S. classes were easier than their classes abroad. (Of the international students who came to America, nine out of ten said classes were easier in the United States; of the American teenagers who went abroad, seven out of ten agreed.) School in America was many things, but it was not, generally speaking, hard.

During her year in America, Elina saw a Broadway show and visited the Washington Monument. She ran track and worked on the yearbook. She was surprised by how involved parents were in the school, much more so than parents back home. However, in the classrooms at Colon High—a school *not* overwhelmed by poverty, immigration, gangs, or any of the blights so often blamed for our educational mediocrity—she did not learn much in the traditional sense.

life after school

When Kim's school day in Finland ended at three forty-five, it was already dark. Her classmates all headed off in different directions. A

few boys in a garage band went off to practice; some of the girls went shopping. No one Kim knew went to afterschool tutoring academies. Finnish kids had more free time than American kids, and not just because they did less homework. They were also less likely to play sports or hold down jobs.

As Kim walked through town on the way to the library, she felt hopeful. She spent a lot of time alone with her thoughts. But, she had discovered, to her relief, that life in Finland was different. The distinctions were subtle: the freedom, the freshly cooked food in the cafeteria, the civility. It was hard to describe the cumulative effect of these differences, but it felt, on days like today, as if she'd been paroled for good behavior.

The town felt cleaner and nicer than Sallisaw, like it was built for people instead of cars. As she walked along the brick pedestrian way, she passed boys with Justin Bieber hair, girls with tattoos, and billboards covered with H&M bikini ads. People dressed slightly better than they did back home, but not radically different. There were not nearly as many tall, blonde women as she had expected.

The neighborhood surrounding her school was filled with eighteenth and nineteenth century wooden houses, built after Russians sacked the village and drove out most of the townspeople in the 1700s. Kim had been keeping a mental list of the ordeals Pietarsaari had endured, from famine to communism; it had been fired on by the British Navy and bombed by the allies during World War II. The mystical land of smart children and Nokia, the one she had read about in America, was a relatively recent development.

After the library, she walked to Café Nemo, one of her favorite coffee shops. She'd come so often that the British owner had nicknamed her *Oklahoma*. She ordered in Finnish, proud to have built up a tolerance to the strong Finnish coffee.

Finally, it was time to go back to the apartment. She was out of excuses. Although she adored Susanne, her vivacious host mother, going home was one of the more stressful parts of Kim's day. De-

spite her best efforts, her five-year-old host sisters had not warmed to her. They resented the attention their busy single mother gave to this strange intruder. It made no sense to them (and indeed sometimes to Kim) that their mom had taken in yet another daughter.

When Susanne was not in the room, the girls called Kim *tyhmä* and laughed. Kim looked it up; it meant "stupid." When she tried to study, they came in and banged on her laptop keyboard. The number four had recently stopped working. Yet her bedroom doubled as their playroom, so Kim didn't feel she had the right to make them leave.

The girls were testing her, as small children will. Kim had never had a younger sibling, and she had no idea how—or whether—to discipline the twins. They were not her children, and she was not really their sister. She blamed herself. Each day, she vowed anew that she would find a way to make them like her.

In many ways, Finland had been the adventure she'd hoped it would be. She'd jumped into a hole in the ice in a frozen lake, an insane tradition in line with the Finns' proud history of endurance. She'd grown to look forward to the warmth of the host family's tiny home sauna after the cold walk home. She'd even made a couple of friends, and not all of them were exchange students.

Her biggest problem was that she herself had not changed very much—not yet, anyway. Most of the time, she felt unsure of herself. At school, she rarely spoke. At home, eager to please her host family, she stifled her frustration. Then she went quiet and sullen when the frustration built up inside her. Kim told herself it was the language barrier; it was hard to find her voice when she literally did not know the words. But this sensation felt unpleasantly familiar, like a bad habit she'd brought with her across the ocean. In her darkest hours, lying awake in her bunk bed in Pietarsaari, she wondered if the feeling would shadow her everywhere.